

A Jesus Person... Watches Carefully

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as we open the scriptures to Matthew 7 this morning, let's ask God for his help. Heavenly Father, you say that you speak to us in your word, that your word is God-breathed, it is living and active, and it is sufficient to equip us to live holy lives. And so, Father, will you please help us to pay attention closely to your word again this morning? But more than that, will you help us to pay attention to our hearts and what you are doing in it through your word so that we can be people who are always walking on the Jesus way? All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. At the beginning of his book, I Told Me So, Greg Tan Elshoff tells us this.

He writes, I'm a college professor. I have been for almost a decade. I work reasonably hard at my job, and I think I do it fairly well. In fact, in my honest and solitary moments, when there is no occasion for false humility, I would say I'm a better than average teacher. I'm in good company.

A recent study revealed that 94% of the people who do what I do think that they are doing a better than average job. And it's not just college professors. A survey of 1 million high school seniors, that's our form fives, found that 70% thought that they were above average in leadership ability, and only 2% thought they were below average. In terms of ability to get on with others, all students thought they were above average. 60% thought they were in the top 10%, and 25% thought that they were in the top 1%. That's a pretty honest admission, isn't it?

You see, we're pretty good at deceiving ourselves, aren't we? Like it or not, we mislead ourselves all the time. We're good at convincing ourselves that maybe we're too busy to help someone else, or that we work harder than our colleague, or that our political hero can do no wrong.

It's easy to deceive ourselves, especially when it pays to do so. A couple of years ago, a number of psychologists conducted an experiment. 306 online participants were asked to write a persuasive speech about a fictional man called Mark, and they would be paid according to how effective it was. And some people were told to present Mark as likable, while others were told to do the opposite.

[2 : 4 2] And to accomplish their job, the participants were asked to watch a series of short videos about Mark to find out about him. But here's the thing, they were allowed to stop watching those videos at any point. And what the psychologists did was to show some of the viewers' videos that presented Mark in a good light first. And then if they kept watching, they would eventually run into the videos that showed him in a bad light. For other viewers, it was the opposite. They were shown the bad videos first. And interestingly, what happened was that if you were paid to present Mark as likable, and if you were watching the good videos first, you were very likely to stop sooner. You don't stick around to get a complete picture. You've already convinced yourself that Mark is an all-round good guy. And it was also true the other way around. If you were paid to present Mark as unlikable, you would also stop sooner if you watched the bad videos first. And so what this shows is that our capacity for being deceived is actually pretty big. Most of us, I think, would like to think that we are not easily taken in. And yet, if it's easy for us to even deceive ourselves, all of us are vulnerable.

And that's what Jesus wants to home in on today. That's where he wants to grab our attention. He wants us to wake up to the reality of deception, including self-deception. You see, last week, we talked about the two ways that we could all potentially travel on. That's the narrow way, which requires us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, pay attention to our hearts, and take seriously the core to clothe ourselves with Christ. And that would take effort and sacrifice and courage.

And so it's definitely easier to travel down the broad way. And in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, how might we travel down the broad way? Simply by being satisfied to do the outward things.

We think that's all we need to do. And all throughout the Sermon, Jesus has been targeting what he calls the righteousness of the Pharisees, one that emphasizes outward conformity to religious obligations. It's a righteousness that says that, well, as long as I'm praying and fasting and technically not breaking the law, like not sleeping with another woman who is not my wife, then I'm completely fine. In the modern context, as long as I show up to church, even online every week, and I give regularly, as long as I have good morals, not like those woke liberals over there who are busy promoting homosexuality, or those corrupted politicians over here busy receiving bribes, well, I'm fine. And yet Jesus says, you know what? You can avoid all the wrong things, be morally or even theologically conservative, and not actually be a Christian. Well, that has been an undercurrent all throughout the Sermon. But today, he finally makes it explicit. You can be deceived into thinking that you're following Jesus when you're actually not. And that's the big shock of today's passage.

Just look at verse 22. Here we have people coming to Jesus and telling him, Look, Lord, here's the evidence that I followed you. Did I not prophesy in your name, and drive out demons in your name, and perform miracles in your name? And you would think, well, as far as evidence goes, that's pretty compelling. Surely these are the kind of people who will get in. They have actions. They have deeds. They have accomplishments. They are impressive works seem outwardly to conform to what we expect from representatives of God's kingdom. But Jesus says plainly to them, verse 23, I never knew you. More shockingly, he says, you are evildoers. You're not on my side.

[7 : 07] You never represented me. You're engaged in self-deception. You think you are what you are not. Or just like you might wear the uniform of St. Teresa or Post-Malaysia or Air Asia, but you were never really affiliated with them. And so you might wear the Christian uniform, but you were never really of Christ. Now all this, I hope, will have a sobering effect on us. It certainly would have sobered Jesus' original audience. And it certainly raises an important question. How then can I not be deceived?

How can I not be deceived? Whether by myself or by someone else, into thinking that I'm on the Jesus way when I'm not? Well, that's the question Jesus wants us to ask. And that's the question Jesus wants to answer today. And in verses 15 to 23, he's going to say, here are three safeguards that need to be in place to protect yourself. Firstly, you need to face up to the danger you can be deceived. Secondly, you need to develop the right benchmark for detection and diagnosis. And thirdly, you need to do what counts, not what doesn't count. And so let's think about each of them. Firstly, you need to face up to the danger you can be deceived. Watch out, Jesus says in verse 15, be careful. The Greek word here is actually beware. And it's used twice in the Sermon on the Mount, once here in verse 15 and once back in chapter 6 verse 1. On the screen, I've just shown you the ESV translation, which is clearer in bringing out the parallel by translating the word the same way. And what is interesting is that when you compare the two times that Jesus asks us to beware, both times, Jesus is dealing with people who are outwardly one thing, but inwardly another thing. Back in chapter 6, Jesus is calling out the hypocrites, those who engage in all sorts of religious activity for show, who do what they do, not to praise God, but for the praise of people. And so it's a kind of deception. Their outward appearance is directed to God, but their inner hearts are actually directed away from God. And Jesus is asking us to beware of following such deceptive practices. And now in 7 verse 15, Jesus says once again, beware of appearances, beware of deception. But this time, it isn't to beware the hypocrites, but to beware the false prophets.

Now, when we hear the word prophets, we might think of a medium with a crystal ball peering far into the future to predict what is going to happen in 10 years' time, whether you'll be married or not, whether you have a job or not. But in the Bible, the prophets are not merely people who tell you what's going to happen in the future. Rather, they tell you about what God says about the present. In fact, that's the main gist of a prophet's ministry, foretelling, not foretelling. They are simply people who claim to speak for God, who bring his message either of judgment or of hope. And so if they are prophets who are false, rather than true, their deception lies first of all in their message. They say things that do not come from God. You'll find examples of such people in the Old Testament, but they're especially prominent in the book of Jeremiah. In Jeremiah, these people are often found bringing false comfort.

God had made clear in Jeremiah that he would not tolerate the unfaithfulness of his people forever. But these false prophets would often assure the people that God would never act against them, that God wanted nothing but peace and prosperity for them. So look at chapter 6 verse 13 to 14, for instance. From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain. Prophets and priests alike all practice deceit. They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. Peace, peace, they say, when there is no peace. Or take these words from Jeremiah 23 verses 16 to 18.

This is what the Lord Almighty says. Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you. They fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord.

[12:09] They keep saying to those who despise me, the Lord says, you will have peace. And to all who follow the stubbornness of their hearts, they say, no harm will come to you. But which of them has stood in the counsel of the Lord to see or to hear his word? Who has listened and heard his word?

You see, Jeremiah has been saying to God's people, God is bringing disaster because you refuse to turn from your sin. But these prophets say, don't worry, peace will come to you. Harm will never be for you.

And who wouldn't like to listen to such comforting words, especially when Jeremiah's message seems so harsh by comparison? When the words are sweet, our hearts naturally want to be deceived.

But they are dangerous. In Jeremiah 23 verse 15, just one verse before the ones we just quoted, God says that these false prophets are responsible for the continued spread of ungodliness throughout the land, since the call for repentance is never issued. And so they lead and even encourage people towards destruction. It's no surprise, therefore, that another prophet, Ezekiel, compared such prophets to wolves tearing apart their prey. And that is exactly what Jesus calls them to. You see, what makes these false prophets so dangerous is not just their message, but their method. Verse 15 again, they come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. And when even just one wolf gets inside a flock, well, they can cause untold damage. They'll leave dead and wounded and traumatized sheep everywhere. And the reason these wolves are so dangerous is precisely because they are hard to spot.

They don't look like wolves. Instead, they look like sheep. They walk like sheep. They talk like sheep. Perhaps some of us think that we're pretty good at spotting wolves. You know, we think we know what a false teacher looks like. We think that the wolves always comes in the form of a crass prosperity gospel preacher.

[14 : 31] But not so. These wolves could look very respectable. They assure you that they reject the prosperity gospel. They say that they affirm the Apostles' Creed. They can quote the Bible very well. Perhaps they can even intimidate you with a little bit of Greek and Hebrew here and there. They uphold traditional family values.

They actively participate in church. They don't look like a cult leader. They look like a potential pastor. But they know how to twist the shepherd's words. A couple of them might even perform impressive signs and wonders.

Jesus himself says so later on in Matthew 24. And they are more common than we might think. Read the New Testament. And they're right there in Galatians and Colossians and 1 and 2 Timothy and 2 Peter and Jude and 1, 2 and 3 John.

They're there in Revelation and even at the end of Romans. They're common. And indeed, they're active. Notice in verse 15 that they come to you. And so the first safeguard is this.

We need to face up to the danger we can be deceived. Wolves come in sheep's clothing, often with a message that sounds sweet to the ears, and encourage us to deceive ourselves.

[16 : 01] And so we need to watch out. We shouldn't be paranoid. We shouldn't go on a witch hunt. But we shouldn't be naive either. But how can we tell?

Well, that brings us to our second safeguard. Secondly, you need to develop the right benchmark for detection and diagnosis. Jesus now brings us into the world of horticulture to give us the right detection tools.

He says, verse 16, By their fruit, you will recognize them. And to make clear what he's saying, he now asks a rhetorical question. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes?

The answer is clearly no. Why not? Because thorn bushes don't produce grapes. That's not what a thorn bush does. Now, a thorn bush might very well insist that it's a vine.

But if grapes never come from it, well, all is revealed, isn't it? The fruit doesn't lie. And do figs come from thistles? The answer, again, is obvious, isn't it?

[17 : 09] Thistles don't produce that kind of fruit. And apples, right, don't grow on lemon trees. Lemons don't grow on apple trees. The fruit tells you what kind of tree it is.

And that's exactly how Jesus applies it. Verse 17. Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.

A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. A few weeks ago, I watched a video featuring a popular restaurant in New York.

And they showed a dish of ham just pulled from the smoker, garnished with thyme. And as they sliced it, it looked exactly like cuts of perfectly rare roast beef.

Except when you finally bite it, you realise the truth. It isn't ham at all. It's watermelon. I know some of you are already asking, what blessing for me is this?

[18 : 13] I know Ben is probably horrified by this. But apparently this restaurant is famous for its meat dishes. You know, smoked pork ribs, things like that.

But they wanted to add more vegan options to their menu. And so they came up with this idea of watermelon ham. And the chef really does treat the watermelon like a ham.

You know, he marinates it for four days with all sorts of herbs. He dries it, and then he smokes it for eight hours. And it really comes out looking like a ham. But there is no disguising what it is the moment you take the first bite.

It eventually reveals what it truly is. Well, that's Jesus' point. A good and bad tree will eventually reveal what it truly is.

And that word eventually is very important. You see, some of you might be asking, well, Jesus, hang on a minute. You've just asked us to recognise a false prophet by their fruit.

[19 : 14] But you also just said that wolves come in sheep's clothing. In other words, the wolf will look like a tree that bears good fruit. So how?

And that's why the word eventually is important. One tree might look like another tree. And I'm not a horticulturist, but apparently there were bushes in Israel that had little berries that from afar resembled grapes, and certain thistles whose flowers look a little like figs.

But if you examine them closely, and certainly if you tried to taste the fruit, you would know for sure. And so yes, a wolf could potentially hide itself for a while.

But if you know what to look for, he simply cannot stay hidden forever. His true nature will eventually come out. We're not to judge too quickly, especially in the sense of condemnation.

That's what Jesus told us two weeks ago. But we are to exercise discernment. But what kind of fruit are we to look for? Well, that is the key.

[20 : 23] Remember again the context and the audience. Jesus has in mind those of us who are familiar with religious things. He has in mind those of us who are naturally inclined to be morally conservative, and who know the right things that we are meant to do.

And so it's easy for those of us from such a background, to mistake doing religious things, and fulfilling middle class morality as the good fruit.

It's easy to think that, oh, the person who is going to church, who posts Bible verses on his social media page, the person who says he upholds Christian values, and who publicly opposes things that Christians are against, like abortion.

Well, it's easy to be impressed by that and think, ah, that's the fruit. But that's exactly what Jesus has been challenging throughout the Sermon on the Mount.

It is not that going to church and posting Bible verses and being pro-life are wrong. Of course, those are good things. But what Jesus is challenging is our tendency to simply evaluate and value things that look good on the outside.

[21 : 35] You know, that's what we naturally look for, isn't it? Oh, we're happy when that person looks like he's happily married, he's from a nice Methodist background, or his parents are prominent church leaders.

We're impressed when the person is a brilliant and relatable speaker. We go, wow, even if the person can, you know, prophesy and do exorcisms.

We only look at the externals. But what does Jesus care about? Ultimately, he cares about the heart.

And that's what he's been aiming for throughout the Sermon on the Mount. He cares that you are poor in spirit. You are humble and contrite.

He cares that you mourn over sin. He cares that you are merciful and that you hunger to be like him. And that's the good fruit that Jesus wants us to look for.

[22 : 34] The fruit of the Spirit, rather than the gifts of the Spirit, matter most to him. We tend to value the latter, don't we?

But Jesus wants us to value the former. My desire is that after 30 years in ministry, you won't say about me, he's a good preacher.

My desire is that you would say, he's kind, he's patient, he's self-controlled. I know that I'm not anywhere near that. So just give me another 25 years.

But that's what false prophets ultimately won't have. The fruit of Jesus' character. By their fruit, you will recognize them.

It's probably no accident that Jesus chose grapes and figs in particular. In the Old Testament, Israel is often pictured as a vineyard. They're meant to produce good grapes.

[23 : 37] They're meant to be people of faithfulness and godliness. But Israel became a thorn bush. And again, Jesus' use of that image is probably not accidental.

Thorns and thistles are associated with sin and curse, not least in Genesis 3. And Israel, by being unfaithful and ungodly, showed themselves to be a thorn bush.

They continued their religious practices. They offered sacrifices in the temple and so on. But they didn't do anything from the heart. And it's the same with false prophets.

They do not exhibit what Matthew earlier calls the fruit of repentance in Matthew 3. Now, it's important to realize that in Matthew 7, Jesus isn't offering a comprehensive formula on how to tell who is a false prophet.

There are other tests as well in the Bible. But he is offering a vital one, perhaps the most vital one. I remember hearing about a prominent speaker, full of charisma, who spoke and prophesied over our city not that long ago.

[24 : 52] In fact, I heard him firsthand. And I think it's fair to say that although he spoke from the Bible, his message was unbiblical. But what was most telling is what I heard later on.

I was told that the praise and worship and the AV team on duty were reluctant to work with this guy again. He was impatient and condescending towards them.

Indeed, in the public meeting that I attended, he did chastise them publicly once, while spending considerable time boasting about the reach of his radio program.

And that was a telling sign. One I fear the audience missed. And so let's make sure we are developing the right benchmark for diagnosis and detection.

It isn't about how eloquent a prophet is. It isn't about how popular he is, how many people listen to him, how fast his church is growing. It isn't about whether he moves in the right circles, whether he's friends with Tim Keller or John Piper.

[25 : 59] It isn't about his charismatic gifts or his academic background. It isn't even about whether he is the kind of preacher who is always preaching and warning against false prophets.

Well, let's not deceive ourselves by applying the wrong benchmarks. The question is, Is there evidence of fruit of the kind Jesus talks about in the Sermon on the Mount in his life?

And does his teaching encourage that kind of fruit, pointing consistently to Jesus? If his fruit is bad, don't fool yourselves by telling, Oh, what a nice person he is, or how charming he is, or how uplifting his message is.

You see, he's taking you on the road that leads to destruction. After all, verse 19, that is where he's going. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Please don't join them. By their fruit, you will recognize them. So what should we do instead?

[27 : 13] Well, that takes us to our third safeguard. Thirdly, you need to do what counts, not what doesn't count. That's verses 21 to 23.

Now, there is a little debate whether this section is still talking about the false prophets, or talking about another group. And I think Jesus is still talking about the false prophets, but he now broadens out the implications.

You see, if the picture in verse 16 is one where the false prophets are deceivers, then the picture we get in verses 21 to 23 is of them being self-deceived.

And that fits with the description that Paul gives to such people in 2 Timothy 3 verse 13. They are both deceiving and being deceived. At some point, they probably began believing their own press.

They were confident that they were doing what counts. I mean, just listen to that confident tone in verse 22. And Dietrich Bonheifer says that such people, such a person is so in the dark about his own motives that he doesn't even realize what's happening.

[28 : 28] And the devil is giving him every encouragement to continue deluding himself. And so I think Jesus is showing us a picture of self-deceived prophets in verses 21 to 23 to warn us that anyone can fall into the same trap, prophet or not.

We too can deceive ourselves into doing what doesn't count rather than what counts. You know, we could think that believing the right doctrine is enough.

After all, that's what these people thought, didn't they? Lord, Lord, they said to Jesus. See, we think of you more than just a prophet. We think you're God.

We believe the Bible. But simply affirming verbally that Jesus is Lord didn't open the door of heaven. After all, Satan calls Jesus God too.

Simply affirming the right doctrine and knowing the right verses is not enough. Alternatively, we could believe that doing visible works, even powerful works, is enough.

[29 : 36] Yeah, these people spoke words of prophecy. These people cast out demons. You know, that's pretty impressive. And they concluded that they were instruments of God and therefore, the door of heaven was open to them.

But then again, didn't people who didn't belong to God prophesy too? Think of Balaam and Balak in the book of Numbers from last year. And didn't people who didn't belong to God do works of wonders too?

Think of the magicians in Pharaoh's courts. Simply performing miraculous works doesn't mean you're in God's kingdom. You see, these people thought that they were doing things for God, that they were doing what counts.

But notice what kind of doing Jesus says really matters. End of verse 21. The one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

And in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, the one who does God's will are not those merely concerned with external things. They're not those who simply outwardly pray and fast and even do miracles in Jesus' name.

[30 : 52] They are the ones who really know Jesus, who really trust him. And who therefore trust and love and want to please his Father from the heart.

Now, of course, their hearts will overflow into action. We're not disputing that. Just read Matthew 5 again if we're not sure about that. But Jesus' point here is that their eyes is not on their works but on Christ.

Because if you're only ever concentrating on the externals, if that's all you're content with, if you never commit your heart to Christ, the consequences are destructive.

Jesus says, I never knew you. You think that you're keeping the law but you're equivalent to lawless people. And that's how the word evildoers in verse 23 can also be translated.

And if your heart turns out to be a lawless one, you cannot ultimately be in the presence of the one who is the fulfillment of the law. So don't become self-deceived.

[32 : 04] Do what counts, not what doesn't. And ultimately, that means paying attention to our hearts. You see, 7 verse 15 to 23 might sound like Jesus is going a little bit off topic from everything that he said earlier.

You know, he's just going on a little rant against false prophets. But actually, he's not. He is still on the same topic that he's been throughout the sermon.

He's been concerned with our hearts. He's been concerned with our inner righteousness, not outward conformity. He's concerned that we don't overvalue the external stuff and undervalue the internal stuff.

He's concerned not so much about whether we read big theological books or volunteer for charity or fall down at revival meetings or have our name on the church membership list.

No, he's concerned whether we know him from the heart so that we won't be taken in by wolves who don't. Because, here's an encouragement.

[33 : 17] encouragement. If Jesus doesn't want us to judge by the externals, well, that means Jesus doesn't judge you by the externals either.

He doesn't judge you by how handsome or pretty you are or how smart or educated you are or how personable or sociable you are.

He doesn't judge you by that because he isn't fooled by that. You know, all of us to a certain extent deceive ourselves about how good we really are.

It's a coping mechanism. But Jesus isn't fooled. He knows what we are really like, what we really think, what we really love.

He knows that we have an ideal picture of ourselves. but he also knows that we don't live up to that ideal picture all the time. And he knows that can cause us deep shame.

[34 : 24] And so we try not just to hide ourselves from God, we even try to hide ourselves from ourselves. And yet despite knowing our true non-ideal selves, he still wants to know us.

He wants you and I to believe the gospel so that he can give us new and fruitful hearts. Hearts that strive to love him and live for him.

That's the encouragement. But we must come back to the challenge. Don't judge by the wrong benchmark. Don't major on what doesn't count.

Don't be deceived. But recognize that true representatives of the kingdom will bear good fruit that comes from the heart. Otherwise, you might be endangering yourself.

So watch carefully. And watch carefully, not just for the sake of your own soul, but for the sake of the souls of your brothers and sisters in Christ. Keep encouraging one another to know our shepherd.

[35 : 35] Keep helping each other fix our eyes on him. For he is the one who will protect you from the wolves, guide you along the right paths, and take you to the eternal house of the Lord.

Let's pray. I'll just give us 10-20 seconds again just to ponder on what we've heard.

Let God do business in your heart, and then we can come to him in prayer. have any father be at work today?

Will you be doing something in our hearts? Will you help us to see where we have maybe deceived ourselves, where we have not always lived in accordance with your will?

And help us to come to you, the one from whom we cannot hide, the one from whom everything is exposed, and yet the one who still truly loves us and knows us. So as we come to you, Lord, we want to repent of where we have not always borne good fruit, but we joyfully hang on to you now.

[37 : 20] And father, help us not to be taken in by false prophets as well. Give us the right tools of discernment. Help us to see and look out for the right kind of fruit, and to see the wrong kind of fruit as well, and to reject that.

Help us to keep walking along the narrow way. We know that the narrow way, Lord, as we heard last week, is a road that can be filled with difficulty and hardship sometimes, and yet we know that that is the road that leads ultimately to life.

So keep us on the Jesus way. Help us not to just think about the outward aspects of ourselves. Help us also to remember that it is the heart that you look at.

And though our hearts are prone to wonder, will you take it and seal it for die courts above? In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Amen.